

MLA Conference Abstract
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Nonviolence, Anarchy and the New Story: The Resistance Literature of the Khudai Khidmatgars
in the North-West Frontier of British India

The emergence of the largest “army” of nonviolence on the ever-restive and heavily policed North-West Frontier of British India in 1930’s was an awe-inspiring event but later muted to an indigenous narrative. Silenced through two vectors, first, by particular tropological frameworks of colonial manufacture, and secondly, by the aggressive apprehensions of a new postcolonial nation-state; the quiet re-emergence of this narrative into history, however, elicits the following questions: How did a people long categorized as an inherently violent race transform themselves, as well as their social and the political, on such a popular scale so quickly? Were the Khudai Khidmatgars, or the Servants of God, simply an aberration instigated by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also known as the Frontier Gandhi, as has often been portrayed? Or, did this new form of communal organization, grounded upon what Judith Butler calls “new constellations” of normativity, shift the norms of violence—both colonial and indigenous—to produce a state of “enlightened anarchy”?

By reading the Pashto resistance literatures of this doubly silenced subaltern movement, to recall Gayatri Spivak’s formulation, one that included a large contingent of women, I argue that its massive popularity was made possible by grafting a revolutionary ideology upon local norms, so that nonviolence was accepted as a flourishing of *Pashtunwali*, or the indigenous codes of conduct, the discourse of Islam and a radical nonstate imaginary. As such, this anarchic political resonates with silent significance even till today; an embodiment that has not been acknowledged in the global context as a production of, for a short moment in history, “the new story” that is being called for today with such increasing urgency.

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